



AUTHENTICITY

REAL FAITH IN A PHONY,
SUPERFICIAL WORLD

Chad Young

The author—their thoughts, experiences, maturity, and character—is indistinguishable from the works they write. That’s why you want to read *Authenticity*; Chad speaks from an intimate and abiding walk with Christ, and he’s spent years teaching and coaching others in doing the same. Strangely, this is a unique book as it’s written from the perspective of an experienced discipler—not pastor, not blogger, not counselor, but someone skilled in the art of personal, biblical discipleship—someone who traffics daily in the netherworld between orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right practice) where all of us live.

Rick James

Publisher, CruPress

Author, *A Million Ways To Die* and *Jesus Without Religion*

After working closely with Chad for a few years, he demonstrates an authentic relationship with Christ on a daily basis. People are naturally drawn to Chad because they desire to have the same genuine relationship with God that Chad has. In this book, not only does he articulate an “authenticity” that is exemplified in his daily walk with the Lord, but he does a great job of conveying these vital relational truths in a simple and understandable fashion. This book is a great guide in growing closer to the Lord!

Tom Heinemann

Major League Soccer player, currently with the
Columbus Crew

Chad combines his insight into Scripture with his tremendous storytelling ability to produce a must-read for students desiring a truly authentic walk with Christ.

Bill Jones

President, Columbia International University,
Columbia, SC

Author, *Putting Together the Puzzle of the Old Testament*
and *Putting Together the Puzzle of the New Testament*

In this intensely personal and yet universal book, Chad Young has written of what it means to let oneself see through the inauthenticity it sometimes seems surrounds the church. By turns memoir, devotional, instruction manual, and just plain good storytelling, *Authenticity* is a must read.

Bret Lott

English professor, College of Charleston

Author, *Jewel*, an Oprah's Book Club selection

Chad takes you through his journey in the way that the guy next door would. He discusses how he has overcome many of the challenges that we all go through on a daily basis, and as a result, he could not be happier living for the Lord. This was a refreshing and informative look at ways that we can change our outlooks and ultimately change our lives.

Bryce Florie

Former Major League Baseball pitcher

Rarely does the title of a book perfectly match the subject matter AND the author. Such is the case with *Authenticity* by Chad Young. In my 25 years of working with college students I have encountered many campus leaders who made a significant mark for Christ and his Kingdom among the campus community. Among these Christ-followers, Chad Young stands out in remarkable ways. I believe *Authenticity* is the first of several books the Lord will give Chad to enlarge his influence and ministry as a disciple-builder among emerging adults. *Authenticity* should be required reading for every Christian high school and college student who is serious about spiritual growth and leadership.”

Dr. Rick Brewer

Vice President, Charleston Southern University

After spending time with Chad, one thing that you learn very quickly is that he has a desire to live his life in a way that glorifies God. I have been able to witness first hand through Chad's life some of the fundamentals Chad shares in this book. In *Authenticity*, you find a book that is open, honest, and straightforward, just like Chad. Within the pages of this book are resources that can help guide anyone who has a true desire to know and follow God down the path of authentic Christianity.

Nelson Akwari

USL PRO and Major League Soccer player, currently
with the L.A. Blues

AUTHENTICITY

REAL FAITH IN A PHONY,
SUPERFICIAL WORLD

Chad Young



Transforming lives through God's Word



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Last but not least, I thank my Lord Jesus, who gave his life for me, changed my life, led me to write this book, and worked behind the scenes during this entire writing and publishing process.

INTRODUCTION | We Have a Problem

Christianity has an image problem. I was recently on campus at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado, and got into a spiritual conversation with a student we'll call "Amanda" in the Student Center. When I asked her what she believed about God, Amanda hesitated.

"Well," she said slowly, "I do believe in God, and I've heard stories about Jesus. However, I had a lot of friends in my high school that went to church, and their lives didn't seem to be anything like the life of Jesus. In fact, some of the kids who went to church had the worst reputations in my school. Several people have tried to talk to me about Christianity, but it's hard for me to believe in something that doesn't seem to have much of an impact on your life."

There wasn't much more I could say. I simply apologized to Amanda for the lack of authentic Christian faith in her high school. I confessed to her I was like her friends when I was in high school. I called myself a Christian, but I lived a hypocritical lifestyle. I asked her to forgive me for the way I acted when I was in school, and she did. The last thing she told me was that our

conversation seemed so genuine, and it made her think maybe there is something authentic about Christian faith.

Recent studies by Campus Crusade for Christ and The Barna Group reveal Christianity's image problem is widespread. David Kinnaman writes, "You may be astonished to learn just how significant the dilemma is—and how the negative perceptions that your friends, neighbors, and colleagues have of Christianity will shape your life and your culture in years to come."¹

According to Barna's three-year study, only 16 percent of people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-nine have a positive impression of Christianity in general—and a mere 3 percent of that age group has a favorable impression toward evangelical Christians! When I read this, I recalled that 3 percent is within the margin of error in most polls—is it possible that *no* young person has a positive impression of evangelical Christianity?

Why all the hostility? We'll dig into the reasons for this throughout the book, but let's glance at them here. According to this study, there are six major reasons why postmodern young adults have a negative view toward Christianity, which is perceived as being:

1. *Hypocritical*. Most teens and young adults are skeptical of Christians' morally superior attitudes. "Christians pretend to be something unreal, conveying a polished image that is not accurate."
2. *Too focused on getting converts*. Postmodern teens and adults wonder if Christians genuinely care about them. "I feel like a target rather than a person."
3. *Antihomosexual*. They say Christians are fixated on "curing" homosexuals and on leveraging political solutions against them. "Christians are bigoted and show disdain for gays and lesbians."

4. *Sheltered.* Christians are thought of as old-fashioned and out of touch with reality. “Christians are not willing to deal with the grit and grime of people’s lives.”
5. *Too political.* Christians are perceived as being too conservative politically. “Christians are overly motivated by a political agenda. They’re right-wingers.”
6. *Judgmental.* Young adults doubt Christians really love people the way they say they do. “Christians are quick to judge others.”²

What’s even more alarming about these statistics is that from this age group—you and your peers—will come the next generation of leaders of our communities, our churches, and our country. Yet most of the young adults your age have opted to reject Christian faith, and these studies indicate young men and women are running from Christians. Meanwhile, we are so busy “being” Christians and “doing” Christian activities in our churches that we are not relating to non-Christians or even each other as believers.

How can we be the solution and not the problem? How can we become more genuine for ourselves and for others who are looking for Christ in us? Does Christ really matter in today’s culture, and if so, why?

You may know people who are confused about the existence of God and frustrated by a lack of authentic Christian faith. Perhaps you or someone you know is turning to sexual relationships, drug and alcohol abuse, and worldly lifestyles in search of significance and satisfaction. If the generation that you are a part of, who will lead our country in the coming years, does not find authentic faith, what will become of our country?

The good news is that there is a spiritual movement growing on college campuses throughout the country, and lives are being transformed by the life-changing power of Jesus. Students like you

are pursuing authentic Christian faith and are making a difference by impacting tomorrow's leaders on their campuses.

I asked a number of students from different campuses to define authentic Christian faith, and the following are some of their responses:

Authentic Christian faith is selflessness; understanding that it's not about us at all. Just as Christ gave his life for the whole universe, we can show that love in selflessness to one another.

— *Lee from Charleston Southern University*

An authentic Christian is so overwhelmed and overjoyed by their relationship with Christ that they don't simply do good works just for their own benefit but namely for his glory.

— *Todd from Marshall University*

Authentic Christian faith is living a Spirit-filled life of worship. It is not self-seeking, but outward-seeking and looking toward Jesus alone.

— *Josh from N.C. State University*

Authentic Christian faith is surrender. It is surrendering to God, his will, his ways, and his plans. It is letting go of self and independence. It is casting off worldly ways of thinking and being. It is embracing the kingdom of God. Through this surrender salvation is received, the Holy Spirit is given, and lives are transformed.

— *Eric from the College of Charleston*

Sadly, authentic Christian faith is something that most people never see. I didn't see it until college, and

I grew up in the church. When it is lived out, you see peace, vulnerability, and an authentic love for God and for others that can only come from Jesus.

— *Ty from Morehead State University*

When I was a college student a number of years ago, I had a negative view toward Christianity that was similar to the views most young people have today. Although I would have called myself a Christian if someone had asked me my beliefs, I was seeking purpose and satisfaction in other things besides Christ.

Toward the end of my freshman year in college, an older brother in Christ helped me discover a road that has helped me find my purpose and deep satisfaction in Jesus. Like all roads, there have been many bumps along the way, and at times I have taken detours. However, God has always been there with me and has helped me get back on the right road. There are some key truths God has taught me along the way, and he has placed in my life many people who have helped me survive on the road during my journey. My appreciation for all God has taught me and my desire to help others along their way have driven me to write this book.

I want to reemphasize that I haven't arrived at my destination yet. The Lord is still refining and changing me. I don't have all of the answers, and this isn't a book about everything you need to know about being a follower of Christ.

It *is* a book about some of the key things I've learned so far and feel led to pass along. My hope and prayer are that this book would help you overcome obstacles and travel well on the road toward authentic Christian faith.

*Let this be written for a future generation,
that a people not yet created may praise the LORD.*

—Psalm 102

PART 1 | The Great Commandment

Love God

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment.

—the Gospel of Matthew

God created us to know him personally. When we lack an authentic relationship with him, we cease to fulfill our overarching purpose. When we fall in love with God as we were created to do, the other relationships and areas of our lives cannot help but become more authentic as well.

CHAPTER 1 | Don't Drink and Mountain Climb

Near-death experiences are sobering, even when you've had too much whiskey to drink. During my freshman year in college, my fraternity brothers and I took a weekend road trip to Boone, North Carolina, to visit one of the local tourist attractions, Linville Falls—located on the Blue Ridge Parkway about thirty minutes south of Boone. Staff at Linville Falls say the falls were used by local Native Americans to execute criminals. Reportedly, no one has survived a plunge over the final section of the falls.

My memory is fuzzy because of the shots I thought would be a good thing to drink after breakfast, but I remember rock climbing and taking pictures on top of a cliff with more than a hundred-foot drop. Always the life of the party, I ignored the caution signs and crossed a fence in order to stage a funny picture near the drop. I hung my feet over the cliff and raised my hands into the air as if I were falling. “Quick—take a picture!” I called.

Suddenly, I slipped and began to fall. Just before I plummeted to the rocks far below, my right hand grabbed a rock.

I was instantly sober. My mouth was so dry I could barely swallow. Sharp pain flooded my arm as my right hand clenched a large rock with jagged edges above my head. The roaring sound of the water crashing on the rocks of Linville Falls overwhelmed all other sounds except the pounding of my heart. With one hand holding the rock above and the other hand dangling below, I looked down with a helpless feeling and thought, *That's it. My life is over.*

I needed someone to save me, but it was too late. I had fallen too far.

My right arm and hand grew numb. Just as I was about to let go, I looked up one more time and saw the face of hope. Kevin, one of my closest friends and my fraternity brother, reached down to grab my hand. What I couldn't see was that two other fraternity brothers, including my future brother-in-law, Jim, had created a human chain and were holding Kevin's feet so that he wouldn't fall off the cliff. These brave friends risked their own lives to pull me back to the top of the cliff and save my life.

I could have easily died that day, and I shudder to think of the amazing journey and adventure I almost missed out on living.

Missing Out on Real Living

One of my greatest adventures has been working full-time for Campus Crusade for Christ, a Christian organization that tries to help students grow spiritually on college campuses. Each year, we survey college students, asking them two questions: *Who is Jesus? What do you believe is the message of Christianity?* Year after year, many answers confirm some of the major misconceptions people have about Christianity.

College students are the next generation of leaders of our communities, our churches, and our country, yet most of them reject

Christianity. According to a recent study, their number one reason is a lack of authentic Christians among their peers.¹

I was on campus with a student named Daniel recently, conducting a spiritual interest survey using artistic photographs taken by college students. We met a student named “Kristen” who stopped to chat with us. Daniel asked Kristen to pick out a photograph that best represented her spiritual life, and she chose a picture of a man passed out on the floor in a train station.

When asked about her choice, Kristen said, “All of my life, my parents made me go to church when I didn’t want to go. Yet all of my friends who went to church were hypocrites. They said they were Christians, but then they didn’t act anything like Jesus. When I came to college last semester, I wanted to get as far away from church as possible. So I joined a sorority and started living a lifestyle that I knew my parents would never want me to live. Now I think I might be an alcoholic. When I go to class every day, I can’t stop thinking about how I want to be back in my dorm drinking.”

Kristen was a beautiful young woman, if you looked past the dark circles beneath her eyes. She had long brown hair that curled around her shoulders and a tanned complexion. The look of exhaustion and hopelessness on her face, however, made her look several decades older than her nineteen or twenty years.

“Can you pick a picture that best describes what you *wish* were true?” Daniel asked. She pointed to a photograph of a little girl laughing and running, holding a cluster of balloons. Looking at the picture, Kristen replied, “She seems so happy. I wish I were that happy, but I usually feel miserable. I want to find a relationship with God that will bring me joy and happiness like that little girl is feeling.”

Kristen's boyfriend was standing next to her, conducting his own survey. When he heard her say she was miserable, his attention turned toward Kristen. "What? I don't make you happy?" he asked her. Kristen stared back at her boyfriend and answered, "No, you don't make me happy. No one makes me happy. I feel miserable and frustrated with my life." She looked upset, as if she was about to cry.

At that instant, Kristen's boyfriend took her hand and led her away. His face was red and mottled, probably from a mixture of fear, anger, and embarrassment. As they walked off, I heard him say, "Come on. We don't have time for this. We need to go study." Kristen glanced back, almost desperate, as if she wanted to stay and talk, but she allowed herself to be pulled away from the table and into the crowd of busy college students.

My heart was heavy. Kristen was living the same kind of lifestyle I experienced while in college, and she seemed ready to turn to God to find the happiness she desired. Her glance toward me as her boyfriend led her away reminded me so much of the helplessness I felt as I hung over the cliff that day at Linville Falls. The difference was that someone had rescued me and then pointed me toward Jesus. No one was there for Kristen, and her boyfriend seemed determined to pull her away from anyone who could help her find God. I never saw Kristen again.

Working in full-time campus ministry for nearly a decade, I have met many "Kristens"—students tired of living their lives in their own strength, desperately searching for significance, purpose, and happiness. Many of these students believe there is a God, but they remain skeptical of Christianity because they haven't met a Christian their age who seems authentic and honest.

Few college students can say that they've met a Christian who fits the definition of authentic Christianity given by Ty, a student at Morehead State University: "Sadly, authentic Christianity is

something that most people never see. I didn't see it until college, and I grew up in the church. When it is lived out, you see peace, vulnerability, and an authentic love for God and for others that can only come from Jesus.”

I wish I wasn't part of the problem, but unfortunately I spent years living as a hypocritical Christian who turned others away from God. I was part of the problem.

I was fortunate to have grown up in a home with parents who loved Jesus and did everything they could to model an authentic relationship with him. When I was twelve, I attended a summer camp where the message of Christianity was clearly explained to me. I recognized that I was separated from God and that I desperately needed a Savior. One night alone in my room, I prayed and asked Jesus to come into my life. I was willing to do anything to follow him. I even sensed that professional ministry would be in my future.

However, as time passed, the worries and busyness of life distracted me. My schoolwork and my football, basketball, and baseball commitments consumed my time and thoughts. Upon graduation from high school, I planned to attend Clemson University in South Carolina, and after that I hoped to go to graduate school so that I could earn a lot of money.

During my first semester at Clemson, I pledged a fraternity and quickly found myself living a lifestyle I knew wasn't right. There was a massive divide between how I lived and what I claimed to believe, and the difference was incredibly frustrating. Something had to give. One night soon after my near-death experience at Linville Falls, I prayed, “Lord, please help me. I'm tired of living *my way*. I don't have any Christian friends and don't know where to start. *Please help me.*”

God answered my prayer when I met a young man named James who was on staff full-time with Campus Crusade for Christ.

He was starting a Bible study for guys in fraternities and asked if I'd like to be a part of it. For the next three years, James mentored me. He showed me what an authentic walk with Jesus looks like. Slowly but surely, my life began to change. The lifestyle I was living that almost sent me over the edge of Linville Falls was replaced by a devotion to Jesus. As I spent more and more time with Jesus, reading the Bible and praying, my faith grew, and I began to experience a relationship with God that was real and deeply satisfying—far more so than the hypocritical years of distraction and partying!

The fundamentals of authentic Christianity that James taught me during those years are the same principles that every believer needs to understand and practice. An intimate relationship with God, nurtured by these fundamentals, is the only way that we can become the men and women God intends. A Christian life that doesn't look any different from the world's way of living is falling far short of the fulfillment and happiness that God longs for us to have—and it is probably turning off people to God's good news as well!

Before we explore these fundamentals in the following chapters, however, it's important to understand *why* intimacy with God is so important. We're bombarded by countless messages each day about what we should do and where we should go. There's only one person who knows what is best for us and who knows the best way for us to get there.

We're All on a Journey

When I was a teenager, I attended a youth retreat at the YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly outside of Asheville, North Carolina. I went on a day hike with some friends up the mountain, and I was enjoying the view from the top. These mountains were named the Black Mountains because of the surrounding dark spruces and firs, and

in the distance we could see Mount Mitchell, the highest peak east of the Mississippi. The sun looked like it would be setting in two or three hours. Realizing I was late for an event with my group at the conference center down below, I decided to hike back down by myself.

From the top of the mountain, I spotted a path that looked like the path I had used earlier. A couple of hours later, I reached the bottom of the mountain, only to discover the conference center was nowhere to be found. I figured it had to be close and searched for another hour. By this time, it was dusk. I knew if I retraced my steps, it would be dark before I reached the top of the mountain.

When a teenage boy from Alabama is alone for several hours in the Appalachian Mountains, he starts to believe every rustling of bushes or leaves is a charging bear—or something worse. I was beginning to feel a rising tension in my stomach. Every few minutes, I heard a stick snap or a bush rustle twenty or thirty feet from me. I felt that same feeling I had as a child when I would dash to my bed at night, diving under the covers to prevent the monsters under my bed from grabbing my feet. I could feel my heart pounding through my chest, and I tried to keep my mind from imagining there was a bobcat walking in circles around me, slowly closing in for the kill.

After what seemed like an eternity, I stumbled upon a house in the middle of the wilderness. A beat-up truck sat in front of the house, deer antlers decorating its hood. By this time it was almost nightfall. Either I could risk getting eaten by a bear in the dark, or I could take a chance that someone in that house could help me.

I knocked on the door and thought I heard the sound of glass shattering inside the house. The door flew open, and a man with a rugged face and the longest beard I'd ever seen emerged from the shadows. I explained in a trembling voice that I was looking

for the YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly. He burst out laughing like a hungry hyena.

Then the man picked up his keys and walked out toward his truck. “Well, ya coming?” he called. I walked slowly toward the truck and opened the door, not entirely sure what I was getting into. “How in Sam Hill did you get clear over here?” he asked. “The Blue Ridge Assembly’s more than an hour away. I sure hope I have enough gas.”

An hour later, we arrived at the camp, despite my fears that he was driving me deeper into the woods. I gave him some gas money, thanked him, and as he drove off I wondered if he was an angel of the Lord.

Have you ever thought you were heading toward the right destination, only to find yourself completely lost? We wonder what our careers are supposed to be, which friends we should choose, who we’re supposed to marry, and what our purpose is in life. Sometimes the only thing that seems certain is that we don’t know what to do!

Yet we often put on a face of false confidence and pretend to know where we’re going. We pretend to be people we’re not, walking with a swagger deeper and deeper into the woods.

This lack of authenticity spills over into our spiritual lives. Because we don’t want people to think less of us, we put on the mask of a much wiser and more authentic Christian than we are. Instead of asking questions and trying to learn like children, we act as though we know all the answers. Other people see right through this however—when our pious prayers don’t translate into action the next day, our authentic witness withers and blows away. Jesus knew we’d struggle with this, which is why he commands us to take off our masks and get real: *“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

Every year, many students ask me what it means to be an authentic Christian. One of the best places to discover an answer is Matthew 19. Jesus had just entered the region of Judea, and large crowds were following him. He healed people, and everyone was in awe of his power. Excitedly, a rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked what he needed to do to have eternal life. Jesus said, *“If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”*

The rich young ruler walked away sad, but that doesn't have to happen to us.

To become authentic followers of Christ, we must count the cost of being a disciple. Jesus demands that we give him what is most important to us, and he promises in return to give us a life of confidence, purpose, and joy. For the rich young ruler in Matthew 19, money mattered more than anything, and Jesus called him out. Our cost may be popularity, or pride, or self-indulgence. Mine—revealed that day at Linville Falls—was my worldly lifestyle and alcohol abuse. Whatever Jesus is calling us to give up, we can be sure of this: we'll never be authentic Christians until we smash our idols, turn our backs on the pieces, and walk toward Christ.

What in your life is keeping you from taking steps of faith with God?

Counting the cost of following Jesus and then deciding to follow him may involve changing our lives. Habits, friends, hobbies, schools, significant others—letting go of any of these *may* be part of the cost. What would this look like for you?

A few years ago, I went to a country in central Asia on a mission trip. This country was primarily an Islamic nation, hostile toward America and Christianity. I was amazed to meet some college students who had decided to follow Jesus despite persecution and hardship that most of us couldn't even begin to imagine. One young man told me that he hid his Bible every day from

his parents, because if they found the Bible, he would likely be executed for his faith. A young woman whose father was a government official shared that her father had beaten her unconscious on numerous occasions because she professed to be a Christian. These students count the serious cost of following Jesus every day of their lives—and still they choose to follow him with joy.

If we clearly understood the joy and peace found by following Jesus every day, the decision to be an authentic Christian would be easy. Perhaps the blatant persecution suffered by some Christians in our world clarifies the issue. For us, the distractions of this world and the temptation to do things on our own make the right decision harder.

Like Kristen, the student whose story we discussed earlier in this chapter, we fill our lives with unhealthy relationships and damaging lifestyles in search of satisfaction and significance. When these things don't fulfill us, we look for something greater. A crisis may cause us to search for God, but we forget that we don't have to wait for something bad to happen to seek him. People who have authentic Christian faith understand that the cost is worth it, because the life that God has for them is so much more rewarding than anything they had to leave behind.

Thankfully, Jesus is waiting to be found when we look for him. *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”*

Everything we hear from the world tells us that the direction of our lives is up to us. There are as many human opinions about what brings happiness as there are humans—no wonder there are so many people who feel lost in the woods! Only our Creator, the One who made us *and* the world we live in, knows the destination that will bring true joy and satisfaction and purpose. He sent his Son to show us and to walk beside us along the journey.

Being Honest with Ourselves

It isn't enough to be honest about the destination of our life and to count the cost of following Jesus. To do these things, we have to be honest about who *we* are, or else we'll be chasing a truth with a lie.

Unfortunately, being completely authentic in our relationships is nearly impossible. We fear that if our friends knew our struggles or our faults they would desert us. It wasn't always like that, however. As children, we were all completely authentic. We didn't worry about what people would think about us when we cried in public places. We didn't care if our diapers were dirty when we were at restaurants or grocery stores. We were who we were, and we didn't bother trying to hide it. We said what was on our minds and didn't try to edit our thoughts.

One summer when my son Wyatt was three years old, our family spent six weeks in Fort Collins, Colorado, attending training provided by our employer, Campus Crusade for Christ. To save money, we decided to rent an apartment with some close friends of ours, Ron and Celia. Ron and Celia had a son, "Little Ron," who was born within a few weeks of Wyatt, and these two boys quickly became best friends.

That summer, Wyatt and Little Ron became quite popular in our apartment complex. Every day while our families were in the apartment, the two boys would stand outside on our second-floor balcony and holler happily at people down below, asking them their names, what they were doing, and why they were doing it.

One day while "Big Ron" and I were chatting in the living room of our apartment, solving all of the world's problems (in our minds only, I'm sure), our boys were out on the balcony as usual. At one point, I noticed that it was unusually quiet outside. What did I see when I opened the door to the balcony? Two bare bottoms of two little boys with pants pulled down to their ankles!

I quickly discovered both boys were urinating off the balcony and watering the flowers below.

Needless to say, Wyatt and Little Ron got into big trouble for that incident, but Big Ron and I burst out laughing together after we disciplined the boys. There was something authentic and carefree in how our boys were acting. Boys will be boys! They weren't concerned with what people thought—they were simply being themselves!

How far that often is from our realities! Most of us worry about people's reactions. Somewhere along the line, we've been hurt by someone who didn't love us unconditionally. We try not to attract too much attention, hoping to avoid criticism—or we overcorrect the other way and attract way too much attention. We create false selves, hoping to control how other people treat us, all the while keeping our true selves hidden. To ensure we are not hurt again, we push relationships aside—including our relationship with God—or pretend to be someone who's stronger, more intelligent, more faithful, and more respectable. The end result is that our lives are based on lies and that real joy and peace will forever escape us.

Wyatt and Little Ron “let it all hang out,” and we need to do that, too. Not literally, of course—I think that's illegal! But we need to figuratively “let it all hang out,” building relationships with God and others in which we present our honest selves. This means we can, perhaps for the first time in our lives, open up and share our hopes and dreams, as well as our successes and failures. Authentic Christianity begins with authentic people who are willing to be themselves, relate with real love toward others, and—most importantly—enjoy a genuine relationship with God.

We need to ask ourselves: Is my relationship with Jesus authentic? Am I experiencing the life-changing power of Christ in my life? Am I too busy to notice? Do I care more about my family, my schoolwork, or my job than who Christ is in my life? Choosing to

follow of Jesus many years ago doesn't automatically mean we are experiencing God in our lives right now. The Holy Spirit produces fruit in the lives of authentic believers: *love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*. Do those words describe us?

The book of Revelation tells the story of the church in Laodicea—a church that was struggling with authenticity. To them, Jesus said, *“Look at me. I stand at the door. I knock. If you hear me call and open the door, I’ll come right in and sit down to have supper with you”* (MSG).

Is Jesus knocking in your life? If so, read on to find out what it means to be an authentic follower of Christ. The first step of authentic faith might be the hardest, because most of us don't understand that it changes every other aspect of our lives. Don't miss out on learning the importance of spending time with God, because time is the most precious gift God has given us while we're here on earth!

CHAPTER 2 | Real Relationships Take Time

Have you ever had a good plan go very, *very* wrong?

One spring evening when I was eighteen, my parents left town for the weekend, leaving me in charge of the house. Two of my buddies, “Bill” and “Carl,” had been over playing card games with me, enjoying a parent-free evening. We decided to stock up on frozen pizzas at the local grocery store in our small town of Valley, Alabama. Bill and Carl ran in while I waited in the car.

Suddenly an old friend approached and asked if I could give him a quick ride home. I hesitated because I knew “Tim” was trouble. I hadn’t seen him since we played summer baseball a few years earlier. Since then, Tim had been in and out of a juvenile detention center for selling drugs.

I fumbled for words and said, “I don’t know, Tim. We just stopped to get some pizzas.”

Tim pleaded, “Oh, come on, Chad. We’re old friends. I only live five minutes away. You’ll be back before they’re done shopping.”

I looked at Tim intently, searching for any indication of dishonesty in his face. *Should I trust him?* Finally, I said, “All right, get in the car.”

Tim directed me to a nearby neighborhood where many of my friends and classmates lived. *I didn't know Tim lived here*, I thought to myself. As we pulled in front of a house with no lights on, Tim barked, “Stop the car. Stay right here!”

He left the door open as he rushed into the darkness. I thought I saw Tim crawling into some bushes in front of the house. Everything was silent except for the typical Alabama night sounds of chirping crickets and croaking tree frogs. A minute or so passed before I saw a shadow emerge from the bushes.

“Let's go!” Tim exclaimed as he jumped into the passenger's seat and slammed the door. He had a large video camera in his hands, and he placed it down at his feet. At that time, video cameras were very expensive, not to mention heavy and the size of a sewing machine.

Bewildered, I asked, “Go where? I thought I was taking you home.”

Tim replied, “That *is* my home. My dad just gave me this video camera for Christmas, but I need to sell it. I need some cash. I came to get it after dark because I didn't want to hurt his feelings by letting him know I'm selling it.”

Although I didn't believe Tim's explanation, I didn't know what to do. Tim had a history of violence, and I wasn't sure how he would react if I didn't do what he wanted. Even though I had other options, at that moment I made a decision to play along with Tim because it seemed the easiest thing to do.

Finally, after I insisted we return to the grocery store, Tim and I arrived to pick up Bill and Carl. As they approached, a station wagon suddenly pulled in front of my car.

A nicely dressed middle-aged man ran to my passenger-side door. He opened the door, grabbed Tim by the arm, and lifted him out of the car. The man looked down at me and asked in an angry voice, “What is that video camera doing in your car?”

I paused, not knowing what to do or say. Everything seemed to be happening so quickly, and I was trying to figure out the right answer to this man’s question. I glanced at Bill and Carl, who were standing a few feet behind the man, but they, too, looked dumbfounded. In an innocent-sounding voice, Tim responded to the man, “That’s his video camera. He was just giving me a ride home.”

The man continued to look at me for an answer to his question. *He must be Tim’s dad*, I thought to myself. The man asked, “Is that true? Is that your video camera?” I nodded, figuring it was easier to play along with Tim than to tell the truth.

At that moment, Tim jerked his arm from the man’s clutches and took off running. The man started shouting and running after him. Bill, Carl, and I looked at each other in astonishment.

Bill asked, “What in the world was that all about?”

“That was crazy! Just get in the car, and let’s go back to my house.”

On the ride home, I was relaying the story of what happened during my adventure with Tim when we passed nine police cars, with their blue lights flashing, on the side of the road.

Bill shouted, “Drug bust! Somebody’s busted!”

We all started singing, “Bad boys, bad boys, whatcha gonna do? Whatcha gonna do when they come for you?”

As we passed the cluster of police cars, one of the police officers pointed his finger at us and started shouting. All of the police officers jumped into their cars and sped after us!

Bill, Carl, and I were taken to the police station. One of the officers knew my father, who was a pastor in our small town. He

said that we were in serious trouble, that I was an accomplice in a robbery, and that I would have to bring my father to the police station the next day for a statement. The next day, the top story on the local news reported that Tim was involved in a shoot-out with a number of police officers. Fortunately, no one was hurt, and Tim surrendered.

When my father returned home, we headed to the police station. I felt ill when I discovered who would be taking my statement. It was the nicely dressed man who had approached my car the night before at the grocery store and had run after Tim. He explained he was an undercover cop, not Tim's father, as I had foolishly thought. After I gave my statement, this officer shared that my story lined up perfectly with Tim's story. Fortunately, Tim had told the truth. The police officer also explained that the man whose house Tim had robbed was the father of one of my classmates. The son vouched that I was a good student whom he respected, and all of the charges against me were dropped.

And it all started with a plan to grab a stack of frozen pizzas!

I jeopardized my future by taking the easy way out with Tim. There were points all throughout the evening when I could have pursued truth and done what was right—but I didn't, because it seemed easier to go with the flow. I didn't realize at the time what I was jeopardizing: my scholarship to college, my future career, and, most importantly, my freedom.

You've probably never had to think about what to tell a police officer. Yet, in a similar way, we jeopardize our futures every day when we don't pursue the truth about God's plan for our lives. If I had known Tim's intentions, I would have steered clear of him that night. But what about God's plans? If we claim to believe that God exists, shouldn't it be our top priority to determine the truth about what God wants our lives to look like?

According to the Bible, there are two key truths about God that should concern us: God loves us, and God has a plan for us. And both of these take place in the context of a relationship with God, as we see in John 17:3. “*Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*”

I used to fret over God’s will for my life. Who should I marry? What career should I pursue? How should I spend my time? Eventually I learned that all of these concerns were insignificant in comparison to the overriding reason I was created: to be in a loving relationship with my Creator. When this relationship is solid, we can begin to understand every other area of life.

Oddly, however, we often want to know God’s specific will for the details of our lives *before* we have a relationship with him. We cannot develop this relationship with God if we don’t spend time with him. Instead of getting to know him intimately and understanding this purpose he has for our lives, we often neglect God’s best and settle for what *we* think is best, which is always a poor substitute. We choose what *we* want, say a quick prayer, and hope God “blesses” what we already intend to do anyway.

Every day, we make relational choices that affect our lives and our relationship with God in some way. Some friendships lead us toward God, while others lead us away from him—and it isn’t always our friendships with other Christians that lead us toward God, or vice versa! What matters is that Christ is at the center of all we do, including all our relationships. I’ve noticed that when I share Christ with others and see him work in their lives, my intimacy with Christ grows. That’s why putting Christ in the center of all of my relationships is a good use of my time, and why spending time with God is the first of the fundamentals of authentic Christianity.

Often our greatest struggle involves spending time with God. Students have an almost unlimited number of ways to *not* spend

time with God: video games, partying, social networking, watching porn, fantasy sports—the list goes on and on. All are unsatisfying substitutes for authentic relationships.

A few years ago, while I was on campus at Charleston Southern University passing out free water bottles to students, I met a freshman football player named Josh. We formed an instant friendship, and I began mentoring him. I recently asked Josh, now a junior in college, to share about his struggle to become an authentic Christian as he has learned to use his time wisely and invest it in a relationship with God. This is what he said:

Throughout my high school years I tried to feed my heart with exciting but empty satisfaction. I would go from thing to thing, searching for that joy and intimacy that my heart desired. While in that search I suddenly found myself addicted to drugs, alcohol, sex, popularity, and everything else that the world had to offer me. I was the master of disguise when it came to hiding these things from my family and Christian friends. As time progressed, I became more and more disgusted with myself.

In one of my meetings with Chad, I told him that something was keeping me from being in love with Jesus Christ. Because Chad's background was similar to mine and because he had mentored other guys like me, he always knew more about me than he would reveal and began to explain my situation to me. He began by asking the question, "How does a man get to know a woman and fall in love with her?" I responded with, "By spending time." He said the same thing is true about getting to know God and falling in love with him. He also said my battle with addictions couldn't be fixed by any self-help books

or doing anything on my own. In order for anything to happen, I would have to make Jesus not just my Savior, but also my Lord as I surrender my life to him. He said it is difficult to surrender my life daily to a God whom I barely know and am not in love with.

In the next few months as I spent more time reading my Bible and praying, I ended up giving Christ more divinity and began to love him deeply. I found that at this point I was able to surrender my addictions and struggles to him and him alone. I have to admit that setting time to spend with Christ in a disciplined manner is not easy, but it's vital to any Christian's pursuit of authenticity.

So is it simply spending real time with Jesus that leads to transformation? Let's look at what Jesus promises in John 15:5: *"If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."* The answer is yes—it is only when we spend time with Jesus, remaining in him, that we are transformed into people who bear the fruit of the Spirit in our everyday lives.

I just spent a week with Josh during a trip to New York City. I saw him lead four college students to Christ, and the day after he returned to his own campus he led his best friend of eighteen years to the Lord! Josh is beginning to have a huge impact on those around him, and it all started with a decision to spend time with Jesus and put Christ at the center of his relationships.

As Josh now knows, having an intimate relationship with Christ brings us joy and satisfaction that other activities can never bring. Time is the greatest treasure we have on earth, and we must consider how damaging it can be to passively waste precious time. If we are to live the life of joy God has planned for us, we must begin by changing the way we spend our time.

Keeping Good Time in Light of Eternity

My personal story is similar to Josh's story. While a college student at Clemson University, I desired an authentic walk with Jesus. However, it was years later before I began to understand the importance of spending time with God. After graduating from Clemson, I received a graduate degree from Georgia Tech and soon began working for a paper company in Chillicothe, Ohio.

I had a strong work ethic in grad school, and I took that work ethic with me to Chillicothe. Besides working over sixty hours per week, I somehow found time to be a leader in the youth group at church, a teacher in the children's program, a worship leader, and a Sunday school teacher. If that wasn't enough, my wife, Elizabeth, and I also found time to attend a Bible study with some other young couples at our church, and we had teenagers from the youth group over to our house two to three nights each week. Every hour of every day was filled with important work or church activities, and we felt proud that we seemed to be accomplishing so much with our talents and hard work.

After we lived in Ohio for a few years, I accepted a position with another paper company and moved to Macon, Georgia. Within several weeks of moving to Macon, I met a young pastor who was planting a church right down the street from our house. We decided to join his church and help him start a youth group, and I agreed to be a worship leader in the worship band. Once again, Elizabeth and I filled our schedules to overflowing with "good" activities. We had well-paying jobs, and things seemed to be going just great—but I bet you can guess where this story is headed.

About a year after we moved to Macon, Elizabeth and I began to feel worn out. I struggled to spend time with the Lord each week. My schedule was so hectic that many nights I would feel too tired to open the Bible. Prayer was difficult. Spiritually, I was

starting to feel the effects of trying to do too much. I became impatient with Elizabeth and started to develop a critical attitude toward my boss and coworkers.

Guilt was quickly becoming my companion—guilt for these sinful behaviors, guilt for not continuing to do enough good things, and, to top it all off, guilt for not spending enough time with God! One night as I was spending time with the Lord, I confessed my sin. I heard a voice in my head telling me I should get up early the next morning to spend time with Jesus. For me, this was a tough request because I was already getting up early to get to work by 6 a.m. However, I was so tired of my guilt and frustration that I decided to listen. I got up early the next morning and spent time with Jesus, reading and listening and praying. My soul felt so refreshed and revived that I got up early again the next day . . . and the next day . . . and the next day.

Over the next six months, I spent time with Jesus the first thing in the morning nearly every day. Slowly I became a more joyful person, and friends and coworkers commented on how much more of a peaceful, loving person I had become.

It was during that time in my life that I began to understand a bad habit in my life that was keeping me from having an authentic relationship with God. For several years, I had been so busy “doing” Christian activities that I had stopped enjoying “being” in a relationship with God. I had been so focused on helping others know Christ that I stopped growing in my own personal relationship. In other words, my overriding purpose of being in a loving relationship with God was being forgotten while I tried to be a hero and help others.

What I learned during that time in my life is that any “Christian activities” I do are going to be hypocritical if I don’t truly know

God. Everything has to start with a genuine relationship—and when my relationship with God is real, I can't help but share him with others!

Later that same year, Elizabeth and I sensed a calling to full-time college ministry. Perhaps that calling was already there, but we hadn't taken the time to listen to God and develop real intimacy with Him. With God at the center of our daily lives, the calling became clear, and our passion grew to help college students discover authentic Christian faith. The next year, we joined staff full-time with Campus Crusade for Christ.

What if I had never learned the importance of spending time daily with the Lord? For one thing, you wouldn't be reading this book! Listen to what Paul says to the church in Romans 12:1–2 (MSG):

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

Are you beginning to see the importance of relationship to authenticity? A real relationship with God isn't just a good thing—it's the *only* thing!

Josh, whose story was told earlier in the chapter, recently asked if he could stop by my house. I had a million things to do, but I

told him to come on over, trusting that prioritizing relationships was the right thing to do.

That night Josh opened his heart to me. He shared his spiritual concern for his father and brothers and how he cried almost every day for them. We prayed together, and at the end of the prayer, Josh gave me a hug and told me he loved me as a spiritual father. On his way out the door, he thanked me for my time and said it meant the world to him. If I hadn't stopped what I was doing to spend time with Josh, I would have missed out on the joy I received from our time together.

What God-given joy are you missing out on?

Think of the events that have shaped you and defined you. How many did you see coming ahead of time? For me, I think about a recent knee surgery I had to undergo because of an old football injury. I had just finished a busy and intense semester working on campus and had to stop everything to have the surgery. Little did I know how badly I needed to slow down and just enjoy God, my family, and life! Though I experienced pain and suffered from the surgery, I felt the Lord restore me spiritually as I came to him for rest. Jesus says, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”*

Do you hear his voice calling us to rest in him? When we rest in Jesus, we remember that spending time with him and sharing our lives with others are the things that last for eternity. Listen to Jesus's words from Matthew 6: *“Don't hoard treasure down here where it gets eaten by moths and corroded by rust or—worse!—stolen by burglars. Stockpile treasure in heaven, where it's safe from moth and rust and burglars. It's obvious, isn't it? The place where your treasure is, is the place you will most want to be, and end up being”* (MSG).

There's no activity we can do on this side of heaven that is as important as spending time with Jesus and leading others toward him. I don't say that to sound legalistic—it's simply true. Remember,

we shouldn't tell others about Jesus just because we think we have to, or we feel guilty, or we want to add another "Christian" activity to our resumé. Everything starts with our relationship with Jesus. We spend time with him first, and everything follows from that.

Jesus invites us to spend time with him: *"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."*

Spending time with the Lord is also personal and intimate. If we didn't spend time with our friends, our spouse, or our family, we would never develop intimacy with them. And it takes time. In one of Jesus's parables, a man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. He said to the man who took care of his vineyard,

"For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?"

"Sir," the man replied, "Leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down."

Spiritual growth doesn't happen overnight. It takes time. The only thing that can produce spiritual growth is an intimate relationship with Jesus, and only by spending time with him can we discover that intimacy.

Before we end this chapter, I'd like to share a few tips I've learned over the years that can make it easier to spend time with Jesus. You don't have to do all of these, but let's be honest—spending quality time with another person requires us to be intentional, so tips like these may be exactly what we need to help us spend our precious time in the best way:

- Try to spend time with God every day, and at the beginning of the day if possible. Talking to God throughout the day and before bed is great as well, but when we start

the morning in the presence of God, it can transform the rest of our day.

- Come with a spirit of expectancy and obedience. Like any relationship, listening is vital, as is a willingness to change. As Max Lucado has famously said, “God loves you too much to leave you exactly the way you are!”
- Remember that God speaks to us through the stories, prayers, letters, and poems of the Bible—so read all of it! It’s easy to dwell on only familiar passages, or to skip around almost at random, looking for passages that happen to appeal to us. But God is a big God, and *the whole will of God* (Acts 20:27) has something to teach us.
- A relationship isn’t a race, so take your time. Some people pride themselves on covering a certain number of chapters each day, or praying for a certain number of minutes. But God may be asking you to read a single verse over and over for a month!
- Prayer is a conversation with God, and we can’t have a relationship without it. There are many kinds of prayer, too: praise, thanksgiving, confession, asking for understanding, praying for the needs of others . . . the list is almost endless. The important thing, as in any relationship, is to keep the focus on God and to keep it real.
- Keep a prayer journal. In a blank journal or notebook, write down the prayers you’ve prayed and the prayers that have been answered. Your faith will grow as you see God answer your prayers!
- Finally, don’t forget that the intimate time you spend with God has *everything* to do with the rest of your day! Whether you’re walking to class, studying for your calculus exam, texting the cute sophomore in the front row of

your history class, or heading out for a night on the town, *take what you learned in your time with Jesus with you.*

But what if we don't even *want* to spend time with God? There are times in my life that I have gone through dry spells and have lost the desire to know Christ better. During those times we can pray and ask the Lord for the desire to spend time with him, and he will rekindle this desire according to a promise he gives in 1 John 5:14–15: *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.* We know beyond any doubt that God's will is for us to remain in him and to spend time with him. When we pray according to his will, he answers our prayers and gives us that desire.

This is one reason that it is important to have committed Christian friends. If we are going through a time where we find it hard to desire God or to spend time with him, our friends can help us. Ask a friend to meet you for breakfast every week and commit to memorizing a verse together each time. Request prayer from a friend. Buy a buddy a coffee, and ask him what God has been teaching him lately. All of this will reinforce your desire to spend time alone with God.

As you begin to spend regular time with Jesus, no doubt you will begin to crave a deeper understanding of God and what it means to live a Spirit-filled life, which is the topic we'll look at next. What is your understanding of the Holy Spirit? Have you ever experienced an entire day when you've felt the Lord guiding you and directing you? How much confidence would you have that you are in the center of God's will if you felt God's presence and direction for an entire month? Let's explore the answers together.